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## The dirty truth: Creeks have too much bacteria

**BYLINE:** Asher Price American-Statesman Staff**SECTION:** MAIN; Pg. A1**LENGTH:** 860 words

City officials blame faulty sewage infrastructure, left-behind dog droppings, wildlife feces and human waste for high levels of harmful bacteria in Austin streams.

New public toilets downtown, pet-waste-bag dispensers at all city parks, and more plantings along creeks and parks are part of a proposal to tamp down fecal contamination in a handful of urban creeks.

The strategies, hatched by a coalition of city, state, university and nonprofit officials, will get a public hearing at 7:30 p.m. Thursday.

For years, the streams have exceeded the state limits for E. coli, a bacterium that can indicate the presence of other pathogens, such as salmonella.

According to state rules, the current bacteria levels indicate an increased health risk for swimming or wading in the waters.

While officials have no overall estimate of costs, the proposed plan hints at how much some of the individual strategies will cost to implement.

Water-free bathrooms recently built in Portland, Ore., for example, cost about \$60,000 apiece and require approximately \$12,000 per unit in annual maintenance, according to the proposal. (Seattle spent \$5 million in 2004 to install automated public toilets; they were removed in 2008 after complaints from citizens that they were dirty and dangerous, according to the proposal plan.)

The city of Austin hasn't chosen a design or cost for the proposed toilets, though the plan indicates it will partner with the private **Waller Creek** Conservancy to evaluate their feasibility. Currently, there are two public toilets in parks in the **Waller Creek** watershed.

The proposal also raises the possibility of installing public showers with the toilets "to reduce use of waterways for bathing (thus promoting general stream quality) and also making the toilet facilities more attractive to use and hence reducing E-coli contamination."

A 2012 analysis by Austin's watershed protection division linked the odors in one portion of **Waller Creek** to a homeless encampment. "Strong odors of urine and feces were normally evident," the analysis said.

Another proposal, to expand Earth Camp, a city program teaching preteens about water quality, could cost nearly \$130,000 per year, between paying staff, improving bus service for site visits and adding course materials.

The responsibility to pay for the plan lies with various groups - including Austin, Travis County, the University of Texas, Keep Austin Beautiful and other environmental groups - that have voluntarily committed to implementing the plan.

For the most part, the costs to the city of Austin are already part of the budgets of individual departments and there will be no City Council action on them, since they're within the authority of the directors of the affected departments.

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The most heavily contaminated stream appears to be **Waller Creek**, where average fecal indicator bacteria averaged 740 colonies per 100 milliliters of water, according to samples taken as recently as 2013, the latest available.

The state limit for E. coli is 126. At that level, roughly eight out of 1,000 swimmers would have increased risks for gastroenteritis, which can cause vomiting, diarrhea, headache and fever.

But with the creeks often quite shallow, it's almost impossible to fully immerse yourself in one of the streams, lowering the risk, according to city officials.

Such thresholds are "protective and very conservative," said Chris Herrington, an environmental engineer with the city of Austin. Exceeding them, he said, "doesn't mean an immediate health risk."

Herrington said Austinites should wait at least several days after a storm, which washes fecal matter into streams, before entering creeks. (For most citizens, creek access occurs in parks and thus is generally permitted.)

The problem has a distinctively urban bent.

"In any urban environment, with aging wastewater infrastructure, domestic pets, urban wildlife, this is always a challenge," Herrington said.

The proposed strategies also get into the nitty-gritty of the homeless issue.

The plan notes, for instance, that Austin does "not currently have educational materials for distribution to the homeless that relates the negative water quality impacts of defecation near creeks."

Waller is one of at least four creeks in violation of state rules: Spicewood Creek in Northwest Austin and Taylor Slough South Creek in West Austin have been on the list since 2002, Waller since 2004 and Walnut Creek in North and East Austin since 2006.

Herrington estimated that half the city's watersheds face similar problems.

"We want to make sure our citizens have recreational opportunities and that the water is safe for them," he said.

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#### MEETING SCHEDULED

The state environmental agency is co-hosting a public forum to discuss contamination of Austin waterways.

#### WHEN

7:30 p.m. Thursday

#### WHERE

One Texas Center, Room 325

505 Barton Springs Road.

Free parking will be available.

Public comment

Can be submitted through Aug. 18 via:

Website

[www5.tceq.state.tx.us/rules/ecomments/](http://www5.tceq.state.tx.us/rules/ecomments/)

U.S. mail

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